Winter 1-1-2017

What We Produce

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Social Models That Can Be Repurposed and Reapplied, an Interview of Pablo Helguera

Jeff Kasper and Alix Camacho,
Social Practice Queens (New York, New York)

Jeff Kasper: Let me start by introducing myself: I am Jeff Kasper, artist, educator, and MFA student at Queens College studying Social Practice.

Alix Camacho: And my name is Alix Camacho, I am also an MFA student at Queens College concentrating in Social Practice Art.

Pablo Helguera: Well, thank you so much. It is such a pleasure to be here, I am Pablo Helguera, artist and educator, and happy to be in this conversation.

JK: Right now we are at Museum of Modern Art in New York City on October 2016. Pablo, I am interested to know what you think about the different types of spaces within which we learn about social practice—and what that means to you.

PH: You know social practice as a genre or discipline shares a similar relationship to other process-based practices, most specifically performance art. Because in contrast to, let's say the more established art disciplines like painting, sculpture or printmaking, which have hundreds if not thousands of years of history, as well as a very established genealogy of forms of teaching, social practice and socially engaged art are the inheritors of a post-minimalist rebellion that questioned traditional artistic aesthetics at the end of the 20th century, and the beginning of this century. This puts these practices in unscripted territory. Performance art is maybe the closest to social practice because while it comes from the visual arts it also borrows from the theater without really becoming theater. And, at the same time, it is not really the traditional visual art we see in galleries.

With that in mind, it's interesting to know how, for example, performance art has been developed as a practice and taught in schools because initially it was a way of liberating yourself from the constraints of the gallery space, the white wall, and the time constraints of experiencing art. Sometime in the late 1950s and early 1960s, what became known as performance could be almost

anything such as one gesture, or something that lasts for one hundred years, or just one pose, or a word, or something else altogether. It did not fit any of the traditional art categories. I would say that socially engaged art emerged from this revolutionary break of performance art.

Admittedly, the problem with performance art is that the moment it became a known and identified discipline, it also posed the challenge of how does one teach such rebellion. How do you teach a revolutionary attitude that seeks to break with every pattern? What we have seen is that while performance art remains a very liberating outlet for many artists, it has also became academic in many ways. I am from Mexico City, where there was an important performance art movement that nonetheless became very fossilized.

I feel very lucky to be one of the artists who started making socially engaged art before it really had a name. Which I believe is really the best place to be: when you are exploring this terra incognita where you don't really know where you are, where you identify and feel that there is a problem out there that you want to solve, and you know that the solutions out there are insufficient and that you are trying to think about something else, all the while responding to the ways that other people around you are doing something similar. But what I think has happened over the last few years has been precisely this process of academicization similar to what I described in terms of performance art and artists' books. So we are now entering into the social practice academic world. Even museums understand what that means right now, even if they are not able to fully embrace it yet. Ten years from now it will be impossible for museums to ignore this tendency.

So these are the problems that we are about to face, or that we are facing currently. What I have done as an instructor of these practices is to primarily think of it as a pedagogical exercise that uses elements of listening, discussion, conversation, evaluation, etc. Much of this is described in my book *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, which is essentially what I like to call a Materials and Techniques Handbook. By way of illustration, if you are learning photography you need to learn about the techniques and materials of photographic processes including what film is, and what different kinds of lenses do, and what setting the exposure is about, and so on. My thinking at the time I wrote the book was to similarly try to pull apart or deconstruct the elements of socially engaged art, in order to understand its components so as to teach how to incorporate them successfully into one's practice, or to consciously modify or truly transform them going forwards.

AC: How is the academy preparing social practice artists for the challenges that s/he is going to face in the real world? For instance: learning how to obtain

grants. Because in order to impact audiences and transform society, some essential values are not coming from the artistic field, they come from other fields. How is the academy preparing artists for this type of challenge?

PH: That is a good question, and honestly I don't run a program that teaches social practice, but I do think we are terrible in our schools by failing to help artists navigate the systems of support that can assist social practice projects. Art schools generally have been very detached from the art market. The greatest trauma of an artist after you graduate is that you are screwed financially. Not only do you owe a lot of money to the school, but at the same time you don't really have a clear path as to how to make it professionally speaking. You need a gallery, but getting a gallery doesn't mean anything. Why? Because you can still have a gallery and be completely broke. The reason why it's helpful to look at all of this is because in a way the social practice artist is not dissimilar from that anthropologist and sociologist, that urban planner, who joins government, who starts working on other people's projects to start supporting themselves. So that is one thing.

The other thing is that the art market does not know how to make sense of socially engaged art. For the art market, art is only art inasmuch as it is something you can acquire, that you can collect, and that you can sell to others. But the art market right now is very much unable to support the experience industry. So what social practice provides is more of a program, or an experience involving a group of people. A collector can't help you with this, or a collector does not see the value of helping you. Yes, the world of philanthropy supports things that are intangible. What I think is missing in social practice programs is supporting the possibility to conduct research work that is fundable. Consider a project like Marisa Jahn's *Nanny Van*, which supports and defends the rights of caretakers. She gets money and support from arts organizations, but she can also go to other agencies that support her social justice agenda. So the advantage social practice has is that we don't necessarily need to fund our projects exclusively through the art world; we can actually go to city councils and social service organizations that protect and advocate for the types of social justice issues we are interested in. Does that make sense?

AC: Yes, but I feel that there is a tension, and I don't know how you perceive this, but: is this practice ethical, or not, or it is good for society, or is it not?

JK: And I also am curious about how this work is measured by us, as artists, and by funders.

PH: I think the issue of ethics at this particular moment is not particularly useful when you speak about value because it goes without saying that a project

that is socially engaged in general is focused on the betterment of society, even if it is a confrontational project and has an antagonistic aesthetic as Claire Bishop likes to describe it. When I think such art becomes more of an ethical issue, and this is really a problem involving funders, is when we try to evaluate the quantitative value of a given project. In other words, for foundations, as well as museums, there is a clear bottom line: how many people came to the event? How much revenue did you achieve?

To shift this to academia: sure, I can teach a class to three people, and this may change their lives; these three people can go on to become really meaningful artists or whatever, but it was only three people. So was it a bad class or was it a good class? It only affected three people's lives, but it was a profound and meaningful experience. Or I create a website and three million people saw it; yet, well: who cares? The quantitative issue becomes very important and also very misleading when you place a lot of emphasis on just numbers. This is also where the artistic nature of the social practice projects come into play. Because art, whether we like it or not, is a symbolic activity. And in social practice we are very adamant to stress that we are not about representation, that we are not about simply talking about an issue, but what we are doing is something that is in the world. The break therefore with conventional art thinking is that we are not making a piece about politics, we are instead doing politics within the piece itself. This brings value to an issue. But at the same time we are still engaged in symbolic representation.

I have a bookstore project in Spanish that has traveled around the country. You can easily look at the bookstore and ask: how many books have you sold? But I have no idea how many books I have sold. I am sure that in comparison to Barnes & Noble it's like nothing. However, we are not about selling books. I mean, the sales process is important, but we are really about being a type of social space. And yet, how do you quantify that? Well, it's very difficult. Still, one way you can do it is to interview individuals who have visited the bookstore, and who have had an experience. Or find people who have donated books. This is the qualitative dimension of the work that nonetheless connects with the symbolic dimension of the project.

In other words: what we produce are models, social models that can be reapplied. One of the things that is very gratifying to me is that the bookstore actually first existed in Phoenix, Arizona, and when it moved on to San Francisco, it inspired a group of people to open their own bookstore in Phoenix. Now there is a bookstore in Phoenix called *Palabras*, which is actually directly inspired on the *Radio Gonzales* in Phoenix. And to me that is already a huge wonderful outcome of an object like this one.

Fail Better

An Interview with the Center for Artistic Activism

Alix Camacho Interviews Steve Duncombe and Steve Lambert (New York, New York)

Alix Camacho: I'm Alix Camacho, an MFA student in Social Practice at Queens College. Today we are at the Queens Museum with Stephen Duncombe and Steve Lambert, the founders and directors for the Center for Artistic Activism. To start I would like to ask you to introduce yourselves and describe what Center for Artistic Activism is.

Steve Duncombe: Hi, we're "The Steves." I am Steve Duncombe, and my background is as an activist and an academic.

Steve Lambert: And I'm Steve Lambert, and I have degrees in Fine Art stuff, but also had an activism background. I came to Steve because I thought he might know more than me about sociology and how I could measure whether or not the stuff I was doing was actually doing anything.

SD: And I found the other Steve because I was seeing diminishing returns in the type of regular activism that I was doing, and was really interested in the power of culture and the arts in bringing about social change. I was convinced that the other Steve had the answer.

SL: And neither of us did.

SD: So we started interviewing artists and activists, folks who combined the practices that we were really interested in. And through those interviews we built a body of knowledge about practices of artistic activists. Once we had that, we figured, well this is really interesting, and we did more reading and research, into cognitive science, social marketing, cultural theory, and put it all together so we could share it with other folks. At this point we have been doing it for about seven years, we have trained more than one thousand activists and artists across the US and in twelve or thirteen countries on four continents. We worked on everything from the legalization of sex work in South Africa, to